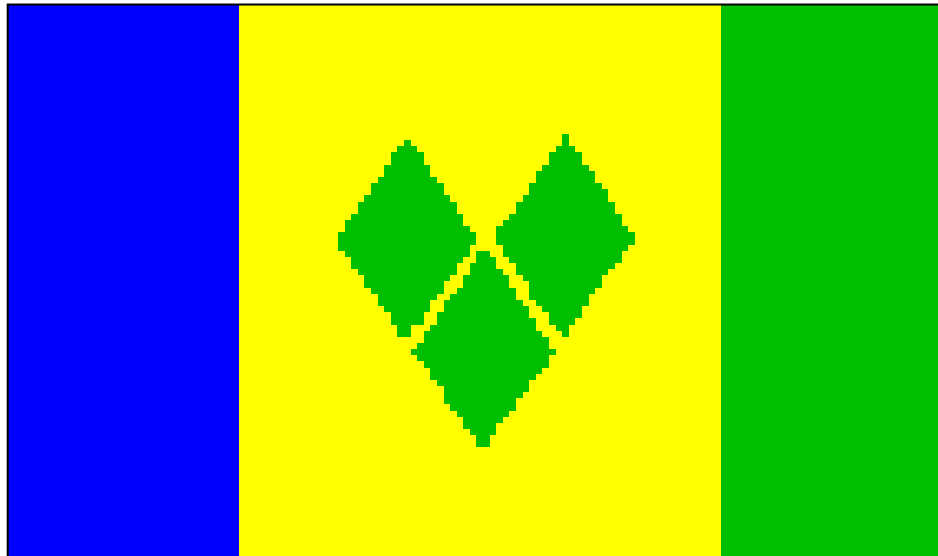


INDEPENDENCE DAY MESSAGE 2010:

GOOD TIDINGS AMIDST CHALLENGES AT INDEPENDENCE 2010

by

Dr. The Honourable Ralph E. Gonsalves
Prime Minister
St. Vincent and the Grenadines



Delivered to the nation to mark the 31st Anniversary of Independence
in
St. Vincent and the Grenadines at
Victoria Park, Kingstown,
on
October 27th, 2010

*Office of the Prime Minister
Kingstown,
St. Vincent and the Grenadines*

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GOOD TIDINGS AMIDST CHALLENGES AT INDEPENDENCE 2010

BY

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

Your Excellency, the Governor General;

Your Lordships, the Judges of the High Court representing the Honourable Chief Justice;

The Honourable Speaker of the House of Assembly and Mrs. Alexander;

The Honourable Members of Cabinet and Parliament;

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corp;

The Commissioner of Police and Officers of the Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force;

Members of the Clergy;

Senior Public Servants;

Members of Visiting Forces;

The Members of the Parade;

Fellow Citizens of St. Vincent and the Grenadines at home and abroad;

Ladies and gentlemen and our beautiful children.

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE 2010!

Our nation celebrates its thirty-first anniversary of independence on this blessed day which our Lord has made. We do so at a most challenging time occasioned by economic, financial and climatic events internationally, not of our making. Yet our small nation with limited natural resources, save and except the resourcefulness of our magnificent people at home and abroad, has not only been weathering calmly the ill-winds from abroad, but we have been making admirable progress on several fronts. So, there are good tidings amidst the challenges at Independence Day 2010: There is much to be thankful for, much to rejoice about; still, we are not yet out of the woods, and the road to be travelled holds many dangerous perils, but which are avoidable if we continue to act wisely, prudently, and enterprisingly.

Since mid-September 2008 when the unravelling of the international financial system spawned the most severe global economic depression for eighty years, our small Caribbean countries have been hurled hither and thither amidst stormy economic seas. We in St. Vincent and the Grenadines have fared far better than most in our region. Nevertheless, we have been adversely affected by the international financial and economic turmoil. Further, in our Caribbean region, the collapse of the CL Financial Empire, with its terrible knock-on effects on CLICO and British-American Insurance Company, placed an extraordinary strain on our governments, indigenous banks, credit unions, national insurance services, and ordinary policy-holders of all works of life. The resolution to these challenges from the affected insurance companies is still a work in progress. Additionally, the falling apart of the Allen Stanford Group of Companies, headquartered in Antigua, threatened to destabilise further the financial and economic system of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU).

Antigua and Barbuda accounts for one-quarter of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the ECCU which itself provides for a common currency for its member-states, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

The demise of the Stanford Business Empire occasioned, among other things, the undermining of the on-shore Bank of Antigua. It was my government, our State-owned National Commercial Bank and four other regional indigenous banks in conjunction with the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank which fashioned a sub-regional solution to save the Bank of Antigua and any possible consequential, contagion effects to our financial system. Fortunately, too, my government and those of Antigua-Barbuda and Barbados, had earlier taken the wise decision to keep LIAT in the skies against the predatory onslaught from Stanford's Caribbean Star; if not, our region would have been deprived of the services of an intra-regional airline.

One major strategic lesson arising from the on-going global financial and economic crisis is that these small islands of the Eastern Caribbean must deepen and broaden significantly their integration efforts so as to mitigate and meet efficaciously the global challenges and their domestic fallout. In this context, the push towards an OECS Economic Union by January 22, 2011, is to be lauded and supported. So, too, is the move by my government to strengthen further the national and sub-regional banking system by its divestment of fifty-one percent of the state-owned National Commercial Bank to the St. Lucian-based Eastern Caribbean Investment Holdings, the parent company of the Bank of St. Lucia. This is no time, for chauvinistic or base insular posturings. It is very much a time for bold, decisive, and wise leadership, in the people's interests.

More than ever, national unity around desirable and achievable goals is necessary, despite the on-rushing season of heightened political competition. As always, this effort demands an enhancement of our strengths and possibilities,

and a reduction, as far as is humanly possible, of our weaknesses and limitations. This national exercise summons from us that which is good and decent. Indeed, leadership is required to draw out of our people that which is good, wise and noble, and to do so even in those cases or circumstances where our people may not know as yet the extent of their possession of such goodness, wisdom and nobility.

These challenging times are not occasions for excessive caution, despondency or learned helplessness. These are times for boldness of action, creativity, optimism, and hopefulness, grounded in the real condition of our people and our nation's circumstances. In moving forward, we cannot wait on perfect conditions in this imperfect world; we must be pro-active in the world as we find it and seek always to advance our nation's welfare in the interest of our people's humanisation. It is imperative that we reject the apostles of negativism who import from some reactionary circles in America and elsewhere the debilitating and false doctrine of "No, No, No" to

everything which is progressive, good and worthy for the people. Such persons are invariably in love with problems and not solutions; they allow their personal vanities and quest for an ignoble power to over-ride their national sensibilities and responsibilities; they treat public policy-making and implementation as if they were a continuous war zone; and they have a marked tendency to belittle intelligence and facts, enthrone ignorance and trivia, and seek to choreograph the dancing of make-believe angels on the head of a pin. It is the monumental time-wasting and energy-sapping dragon's dance of a wholly unproductive negativism and defeatism.

Fellow Vincentians, I have oft-repeated that in this our Earthly City we will never find perfection. We must get on with our individual and collective work in imperfect conditions and do the very best we can. The sage Prophets of old have so taught us. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we are wisely counseled that: *"Farmers who wait for perfect weather never plant. If they watch every cloud, they never harvest"*. This simple yet

profound teaching has been fully embraced by my government and we have applied it in practice. It is through this application that we have chalked up accomplishments which others felt were well-nigh impossible such as the attainment of universal secondary education in only five years from a narrow base of a mere 39 percent of the 12-year olds in secondary schools; the construction of the historic Bridge over the Rabacca Dry River; the building of the Jet Airport on Canouan; the commencement of the construction of the Cross Country Road; and the on-going construction of the massive project known as the Argyle International Airport.

It is the same guidance from the Book of Ecclesiastes which will impel us to build a new city at the site of E.T. Joshua airport upon the completion of the international airport at Argyle in mid-2012. It is that self-same inspiration which will command us creatively to relocate the Milton Cato Memorial Hospital, to construct the National Stadium, to provide "One Laptop per Child", to implement the "Lives to Live" Project for the mentally

and physically-challenged, to create more jobs and additional wealth for our citizens, to reduce further poverty and indigence, and to protect and uplift ever more our children, young persons, and the elderly.

Despite the challenges which have come upon us from outside, and not of our making, our nation has made important strides in the last two years in several areas of public policy including the Education Revolution, the Health and Wellness Revolution; Housing and Lands; Information Communications Technology; Agricultural Diversification; Fishing; Tourism investments; Water and Electricity Services; the Physical Infrastructure, including Roads' development, Airports and Seaports; Youth, Sports, and Culture; and Poverty Reduction. For these accomplishments we thank all our people who have worked in a disciplined and focused manner under the suzerainty of Almighty God.

In these developmental areas, and others, it is vital that we satisfactorily engage our development partners around the world, especially the developed countries. Assembled here are several diplomats or representatives of developed nations. These countries solemnly pledged at Monterrey in Mexico in 2002 that they will provide 0.7 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Official Development Assistance. This pledge is the practical fulcrum around which the Eighth Millennium Development Goal (MDG) revolves. Sadly, this solemn pledge has been broken and has become ever more elusive. Similarly, the promises emanating from the global dialogues on Climate Change for adaptation resources have similarly not materialised. Climate Change represents an existential threat to small island developing states like ours. It is plainly cruel to make promises and then break them on this matter of life and death which we ourselves have not in any way caused. I am asking the representatives of the developing nations present among us to transmit yet again to their governments our pain and suffering attendant upon these broken pledges or

promises. Surely, the current difficult economic circumstances globally cannot properly be used as a convenient excuse to evade or avoid solemn international obligations, freely entered upon.

Fellow-Vincentians, there are some areas of on-going public policy on which some specific announcements are in order today.

First, in keeping with my government's long standing policy of providing duty-free access for Christmas barrels and packages, this concession will be available this year from November 8th through January 14th 2011. Last year, some 15,000 such barrels and packages were cleared under this worthy concession.

Secondly, as of January 2011, the monthly public assistance for the economically-disadvantaged, including children and the elderly, will increase in each category by 25 percent, that is by one-quarter.

Thirdly, the policy of turning “Dead Property into Live Property” which has been accelerating over the past few years will be further boosted with the continued distribution by my government of hundreds of housing lots nation-wide for economically-disadvantaged persons at preferential prices. Moreover, the interest rate on outstanding balances on the purchases of these lands has been reduced from 8 percent annually to 3 percent and a cap of 5 years has been placed on the number of years for which interest is payable.

Fourthly, the special allocations for university education for nurses, policemen/women, teachers, and public servants continue for the current and up-coming academic year.

Fifthly, two important sporting and recreational facilities in the city of Kingstown and its environs will commence their build-out shortly. I refer to the recreational and community facility for children, the family, the young, and the elderly at Roseau on

the site which has been thus prepared by the people themselves. Further, last Friday, I gave instructions to the State-owned National Properties to sell, on terms, to the State-owned National Lotteries Authority the parcel of land in lower Kingstown near to Bay Street, known as the old Glove Factory site or the Anglican School Annex. The Lottery has been mandated to develop an indoor sports facility for basketball, netball and a gymnasium as requested by several sporting organisation.

Sixthly, we shall shortly commence our special annual Christmas work programme through Public Works and BRAGSA. Look out for it!

Although our economic circumstances are challenging as a consequence of the global economic meltdown, surely we can afford these modest but vital measures to assist in the further upliftment of the economically-disadvantaged, the

working people, children, young persons, the elderly, and sportsmen and sportswomen.

More broadly, focused developmental policies are to be implemented from January 2011 in the following areas:

First, an Agricultural Diversification Programme to uplift farmers, financed largely by proceeds from a \$30 million soft-loan from the Export-Import Bank of Taiwan.

Secondly, the implementation of a \$35 million Health Sector Development Programme financed by the European Union through the 10th European Development Fund.

Thirdly, the implementation of the \$40 million European Union-financed project for the further development of Post-Secondary Education. Indeed, it is expected that three contracts, under this programme amounting to \$22 million will commence in November 2011.

Fourthly, the implementation of an integrated Agricultural Development Programme financed by an expected \$37 million from the Banana Accompanying Measures (BAM), financed by the European Union.

Fifthly, the implementation of the Lives to Live Project for mentally and physically-challenged persons through ALBA and managed by Cuban and Vincentian experts.

And sixthly, the implementation of the One Laptop Per Child Project through collaboration between the government of Portugal and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Indeed, two days ago the government of Portugal confirmed to me, after a face-to-face meeting between its Prime Minister and President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, that thirty thousand laptops will be delivered in January 2011 for our primary, secondary, and post-secondary students. They are being assembled in Venezuela for Portugal.

These developmental initiatives are part and parcel of a whole bundle of on-going projects, including the construction of the Argyle International Airport which will contribute to making Tourism a truly transformational sector in the economy.

In the meantime, the private and cooperative economic sectors are performing admirably in challenging circumstances globally. Tourism investments, including foreign direct investments, are continuing at Buccama, Bequia, Canouan and Union Island. We are most grateful!

Fellow-Vincentians, our nation's history, geography, and islandness have fashioned us. We are worthy children of a noble Caribbean civilisation. In the past, we endured much pain and hardship in our history beyond anything which now afflicts us; and we triumphed over all those immense adversities and inhuman impositions including colonialism, genocide, slavery, and indentureship. The challenges that confront us

now pale into insignificance, comparatively. As always, we shall dig deep into our individual and collective selves to survive and thrive. It is true that we are not better than anyone else, but no one else is better than us. We can be and do what we want to be and do in accord with our goodness, wisdom, potential, and God-given talents. The opportunities for our people, especially the young, are enlarged as never before. They are the future of our land which we all love and cherish. We must lift them up as eagles and let them soar with their wings unclipped. In turn they must be cognizant of their obligations and treasure their parents, families, teachers, elders, and communities.

Our future is bright. We must be confident about that and work towards its true fulfillment. It is a great cause and great causes have never been won by doubtful men and women.

On this our 31st anniversary of independence, we must thus rejoice for our blessings amidst our many challenges; conquer

the difficulties; and turn every setback into an advance, individually and collectively.

On behalf of my government, I wish us all a wonderful Independence Day. And may Almighty God continue to bless us and guide us, always!

Thank you!